

SHE SELLS SEASHELLS BY THE SEASHORE

A Feature Film script

by

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Degree: Masters of Arts in Writing (Research)

2006

Acknowledgements:

I would like to acknowledge my supervisor Margot Nash for her continued enthusiasm and support around the project, not to mention the valuable time given to script editing and robust discussions from which I hope a better project is evident.

I would also like to make a note of deep thanks and appreciation to my partner Jay Rutovitz for her unswerving belief and support in helping me transform Mary from troublesome night stalker to feature film script heroine. It would not have been possible without both.

Thanks are especially deserved for supportive housemates, family members, neglected friends and to Margaret Walker, for inspiration.

Preface

The birth of this project was curious. I will begin by telling you a story. It is a strange one. Some years ago, while living in London, I was visited in my dreams by an odd creature. At first I did not think much of it. I am a writer and a filmmaker. Dreams are the flour and water of our trade. But what was unusual, at least for me, was this dream was recurring and regularly so. What began as an amusing time-travelling experience became more ominous with each visit. I began to feel stalked by this character. Previously I had been an enthusiastic sleeper, not prone to nightmares. My dreams were vivid, surreal and immensely enjoyable. As the months went by I began to approach my bed with real apprehension.

As dreams can often be, the details were extreme in both their presence and their absence. I was always at a sea cave. In this cave dwelt a woman. She was always in what appeared to be Victorian Dress. She was dark haired and quite severe looking, both in her manner and appearance. She was highly intelligent and “suffered fools very un-gladly” as she would say to me while haranguing me in the strangest accent on this or that topic. I could barely understand her. The most frustrating thing was I could never quite remember *what* it was she was telling me with such great purpose and intense focus. But whatever it was, it was extremely important to her. Most of the time she seemed in a barely concealed fury, both with me, and “everyone around her”, whoever ‘everyone’ might be. I certainly didn’t know. She clearly worked, toiled even, but at what, I could not fathom. I just knew every time I came visiting it was something to do with the rocks she worked amongst. As my eyes closed, night after night, there was no doubt that it was I who was the visitor, received under pained sufferance into her vast domain of sea caves set deep within the cliffs. We would walk an endless rocky shore pounded by incoming waves and caressed by outgoing tides, back and forth, back and forth. I would come into this world of a night and leave by the morning, always spent and exhausted.

Who was she and why me? Why choose me to visit her bad tempered and confusing tirades upon? She was clearly a spinster. There was no Mr in the background or Mrs in her aura. Her clothes were of a historical time gone past but she hardly seemed to have bothered in her dress, which often looked like it had been thrown together and was

covered in mud and sand. I was mystified. What had I done to deserve these regular subconscious bullying sessions?

“You know who I am” she would seethe. “I don’t!” I would shout back in my dreams. “I really don’t but I wish I did! Then you might leave me alone.” Scowling she would stomp off down the shore and I, who seemed to have no free will in this world of hers, would have to miserably follow, wondering what was in store for me tonight. What unfathomable task would she set me? It always seemed to involve hard labour, (breaking rocks with a hammer) and some sort of argument. I gradually worked out that it was a kind of science or geology she was involved in.

This went on for nearly two years. I no longer looked forward to sleep. Finally, I asked everyone I knew if they were aware of a woman geologist in the Victorian times who was most definitely working class, had a strong accent and who did not suffer fools gladly!

Once I found descriptions of a woman who sought fossils along the treacherous south Dorset coastline in the early 1800’s, who was of abrupt and forthright character and who was working class, there was no doubt in my mind that it was she, Mary Anning. What had been a baffling mystery now made complete sense. As I discovered more, it was as if my dreams had been written down and I was reading them back. The strange thing was, as soon as I knew it was Mary Anning, she never visited me again. Little did I know, that despite regaining my sleep she would continue to haunt me in my waking moments. This continued until I decided I would write a feature length script about her life and work, the very script you have before you. And that is how I came to write about Mary Anning, the woman who sold “seashells by the seashore”.

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Abstract:

Mary Anning was a working class woman from Lyme Regis, southwest England, (1799 – 1847) who became a major figure in palaeontology. In fact the science historian Stephen Jay Gould (1992) asserts that she was ‘probably the most important unsung (or inadequately sung) collecting force in the history of palaeontology... She directly found, or pointed the way to, nearly every specimen of importance.’

In the film script I tell the Mary Anning story, using her life as a basis from which to explore the life of a character whose unique intelligence and determination overcame multiple obstacles in her quest for knowledge about fossils and their implications for the theory of the origin of the world.

The film also explores the social and intellectual climate of the time. This was a period of great excitement and turbulence where people were extremely disturbed by the implications of fossil discoveries. These discoveries raised real questions about the validity of the bible, which until then had been seen as a true historical account of the earth’s history.

The discoveries of people like Mary, brought on nothing short of an intellectual revolution, which logically concluded in Darwin’s theory. The early nineteenth century was a time of great ferment, controversy and excitement as people grappled with the mysteries of deep time and the earth’s origins and the conflict with religion that brought.

This film also deals with the complexities of a working class woman who participates as an equal with her social superiors and all the contradictions that raises as well as exploring the emotional landscape of someone who dared to live outside of the social norms of the day.

The exegesis discusses the research and writing challenges of making a compelling narrative about Mary’s life in two hours of film time when the huge amount of material researched over a period of years could have easily filled a book. It explores the issues raised by turning such a large and complex story into a feature film, the place for factual accuracy and the need above all, to compress and streamline the narrative to service the film form while still honouring the emotional and dramatic truth of Mary Anning’s life.